

ON WISCONSIN | DOWNTOWN BELOIT

On Wisconsin: Beloit's downtown an emerging destination



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BELOIT — An old Woolworth's building slated for the wrecking ball is now a gathering spot in this city's downtown.

Bushel & Peck's opened its doors in 2008 and is home to a restaurant and locally grown produce packed in Mason jars. There are pickled cucumbers, beans, Brussels sprouts and beets. Large communal tables and soft, comfortable lounge chairs provide a place to enjoy a hummus plate or three-cheese panini.

Five years after the opening, development continues to thrive in this downtown, located in a city that for many is synonymous with high unemployment and crime.

In 2009, I came here to report on ShotSpotter, a system that uses an elaborate series of sound-detecting sensors that allows police to better detect where and when guns are fired. That was the same year this city of 37,000 had an unemployment rate of 17.4 percent, the highest in the state.

Crime and joblessness are still major concerns here. ShotSpotter continues to operate and the city's unemployment rate is the second-highest in the state among major cities, but has fallen to 11.2 percent.

But when I returned recently, I found a downtown with energy, more new businesses, a major redevelopment project underway and, thanks to the Harlan Jefferson Trio, a literal vibe.

On Fridays, during the summer months, the lunch hour is a two-hour affair. When I stopped by it featured a catered lunch of brats topped with shredded smoked cheese, served with a side of cole slaw and a drink for \$6. Jefferson and his soprano saxophone and two bandmates provided the background music at Fridays in the Park, an event sponsored by the Downtown Beloit Association at the southwest corner of State Street and Grand Avenue.

More than 200 people showed up.

"Downtown is kind of the place to be in Beloit right now," said Darren Larsen, who opened his Cheese People shop downtown in 2012. "We just like the idea of the downtown community and everything it's got going now."

Larsen and his wife, Judith, started their cheesemonger careers in 2009, setting up at area farmers markets. In the fall of 2011, they purchased a more than 100-year-old building and remodeled the space into their shop that opened in May of 2012.

This fall, the couple will add Cafe Fromage to their business.

“It was a pretty good risk for us,” Darren Larsen said of the initial investment in their downtown business. “It’s a big investment for a family-run business, but we’re excited about the opportunities that will come in the next few years as we build the business.”

The downtown includes longtime businesses such as Stanton Shoes and Austin’s Barber Shop but also FatWallet, an advertising and marketing company that features a bargain hunting website. The company employs more than 60 people and in 2011 was named by Entrepreneur.com and the Great Place to Work Institute of San Francisco as one of the best places to work in the country.

Down the street, in the heart of the downtown, Hendricks Commercial Properties is building the Phoenix, a retail and multifamily redevelopment. The four-story project includes three floors of housing and more than 12,000-square-feet of retail space on the ground level.

In midst of a revival

Judy Rasmussen has lived most of her life in Beloit. The 70-year-old retiree of Warner Electric Brake remembers when the downtown flourished in the 1960s and 70s, and saw its decline in later years when many retailers moved to the Beloit Mall. The mall is no more, and Rasmussen is now witnessing the downtown’s rebirth. She regularly attends Fridays in the Park and the Saturday downtown farmers market.

“It fills this street and fills that street. It’s huge,” Rasmussen said referring to the farmers market. “Sometimes you can’t even walk through it, it’s so crowded. It’s nice down here.”

Rasmussen remembers when Beloit Corp. employed more than 3,000 people and its closure in 2000, and when Fairbanks Morse had 5,000 employees. The diesel engine manufacturer has shrunk to 350 employees but is now making engines for the U.S. Navy’s littoral combat ships being built in Marinette and makes stationary power systems used in hospitals, universities and power plants.

Rasmussen also saw voters here approve a \$70 million referendum in 2012 to renovate most schools in the district and build a middle school and a pool. Officials say the projects will not only benefit education but serve as a catalyst for economic development.

One of the newest arrivals to the downtown would be at home in Cedarburg, Wisconsin Dells or any other tourist destination, but Scott and Teala Lamoreux chose Beloit for their specialty candy, chocolate and gourmet popcorn store. The couple started their Northwoods Premium business in 2007 as a wholesale operation based in northwest Wisconsin. They moved to southern Wisconsin to be closer to family and had a small commercial kitchen in Loves Park, Ill. They moved to Beloit’s downtown and opened on Valentine’s Day of this year.

“Downtown Beloit is making a lot of strides in upgrading the area, and it’s only going to get better,” Scott Lamoreux said. “We were encouraged by the progress.”

The Lamoreuxs, both 40, still sell at the Beloit and Rockford, Ill., farmers markets, but their shop is packed with specialties such as caramel crunch pretzels, almond English toffee and a variety of chocolate creations. One of their specialties is a popcorn ball that is soft and chewy.

In fact, business is so good, they plan to expand, doubling their floor space and moving some of the production out front so customers can watch how their treats are made. In addition to their store and the farmers markets, their products are sold in wine and cheese shops, orchards and other retailers in a five-state region.

Scott Lamoreux sees a bright future, not only for his shop but for others .

“I think the progress will continue,” Lamoreux said. “I think it will become an attraction for visitors (from) out of town to come on in and spend some time and enjoy downtown Beloit just as you would enjoy Monroe or Woodstock (Ill.) or Lake Geneva.”

On Wisconsin



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